

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

## DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Faculty Publications, Department of History

History, Department of

---

January 2003

### Review of Carl Djerassi, *This Man's Pill: Reflections on the 50th Birthday of the Pill*

Rose Holz

University of Nebraska - Lincoln, [rholz2@unl.edu](mailto:rholz2@unl.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/historyfacpub>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

---

Holz, Rose, "Review of Carl Djerassi, *This Man's Pill: Reflections on the 50th Birthday of the Pill*" (2003). *Faculty Publications, Department of History*. 38.  
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/historyfacpub/38>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the History, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications, Department of History by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

## BOOK REVIEWS

Carl Djerassi, *This Man's Pill: Reflections on the 50th Birthday of the Pill* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), viii + 308 pp., illus., \$25.00.

When I was asked to write a review of Djerassi's recent book, *This Man's Pill*, I had no idea what to expect. As a historian of birth control, I of course knew his name and his role in the development of oral contraceptives, but beyond that I knew little else. And so when his book arrived, I was surprised and also in many ways pleased, for this is not your usual academic publication but something quite different. Telling the story both of the Pill and his own life, Djerassi alternates between prose and verse, narration and dialog, ultimately giving concrete example to what emerges as his larger mission: the integration of the sciences and the arts in order to reach audiences beyond the walls of the academy. And in this call, Djerassi could have found no more sympathetic reader. But there was something else which intrigued me about the book as well: not intended as a straight rendition of historical "facts," it was instead written as if to suggest a larger journey, in part towards the development of the Pill but also where the development of the Pill led Djerassi.

Where, then, does he take us? The first few chapters deal with the Pill's creation, where Djerassi explains who was involved in this techno-

logical breakthrough as well as the science behind it. He then moves onto some of the social issues this new method has raised, examining, for example, why Japan took so long to approve it, why there is no comparable product for men, and what it means that we can now reproduce without actually engaging in coitus at all. The remainder of the book turns to the Pill's effect on Djerassi, and it is here where he boastfully articulates not only his artistic awakening but his realization that art could be used to spread the knowledge, if not the thrill, of science. Most fascinating was the impact this epiphany had on his teaching, as he found himself using ever more "unconventional" methods with glorious success.

Throughout my reading, however, I could not help but wonder about several things. In part, I noticed how once again the revolution of birth control became the revolution of the Pill (despite Djerassi's efforts to avoid this path), and that it was this which shattered the connection between sex and procreation. Of course, I would never deny the significance of oral contraceptives, for that would mean contradicting what Loretta Lynn once so movingly sang: "the feeling good comes easy now since I got the pill." But it does seem somewhat unfair not to mention, for example, the visions of those sex radicals of the early twentieth century who dreamed, with imaginations as fertile as Djerassi's own, of days when sex could be separated from the creation of life. Certainly, the Pill contributed tremendously to the realization of such dreams, but to say that it "started" it all (p. 4) oversimplifies a very complicated, if not also a very interesting, story.

Most pressing in my wonderings, however, concerned the ethics of scientific investigation itself. Despite Djerassi's interest in the subject, as evidenced (among other things) by his discussion of the thalidomide and Dalkon Shield controversies of the 1960s and '70s, what he fails to mention is how these incidents coincided with revelations about ethical transgressions among scientists themselves. The problem, in other words, was not simply inadequate research but the abuses of research when it took place. And with respect to contraceptives, I do not simply mean the clinical trials of the Pill in Puerto Rico during the late 1950s, but the many more investigations in the decades that followed. Not least among them was a study carried out in conjunction with the Syntex Company (for whom Djerassi worked) which in 1971 left seven impoverished women pregnant because they had, in a double-blind research project, been unwittingly supplied with placebos rather than oral contraceptives. It may be the case that Djerassi remains to this day unaware of this particular incident, but it is puzzling that the larger (and well-documented) dilemmas about the methods of research would fall beyond his analytical radar. It

would seem, then, that not only had history failed Djerassi but so too art's razor edge of self-reflexivity, which at its maddening best calls into question what we hold most dear. Indeed, for all the book's joyful exuberance about the necessity of art and its much-welcomed call for the shattering of walls between the disciplines, it remains an exaltation of science and its noble practitioners.

For these reasons and more, I found *This Man's Pill* an engaging and provocative read, both for what it said as well as for what it did not. And I await with great interest to hear the opinions of others.

Rose Holz  
*University of Nebraska–Lincoln*